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Agenda item 23

INDIGENOUS ISSUES

Written statement submitted by Survival International, a non-governmental organization on the Roster

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[9 April 1996]

1. Survival International is very pleased with the fact that the item "Indigenous issues" has been introduced separately on the agenda. The United Nations Commission on Human Rights shows with this to be determined to consider this subject honestly and efficiently, as we all know that the human rights situation of many indigenous peoples in the world is far from good.

2. We do not have to mention the many examples of political instability and armed conflicts, arisen because of the unjust treatment, the threat to the natural environment, displacement of and unequal opportunities and services for the indigenous peoples throughout the world. According to information from the indigenous people's organization in Suriname, which is a small republic in the Amazon Basin in South America, parliament is presently in the process of approving a contract with a Malaysian logging company for an area of over a million hectares in the interior of Suriname. This is almost a quarter of the Surinamese rainforest. An Indonesian logging company is distributing chain saws to cut wood, which it then exports. Because of the

upcoming elections in Suriname, logging concessions of more than 100,000 hectares are given to political friends. The resulting clearing of the forests will deprive indigenous peoples of their essential needs to maintain their traditional life. A Canadian gold-mining company, the same one involved in the Omai-cyanide spill in Guyana, is exploring for gold in indigenous and Maroon areas. Maroons are the tribal descendants of former African slaves. An American and a South African company are exploiting bauxite in the interior of Suriname. The indigenous and Maroon peoples have in none of these cases participated in decisions, although they are forcibly displaced without any form of compensation.

3. Add this to the facts that 75 per cent of the indigenous and tribal peoples in the interior of Suriname have no access to education or basic health care, and other social services are not provided for in the interior, which is especially unacceptable in this time of economic deterioration in Suriname. The Suriname Government does not even want to recognize the existence of indigenous and tribal peoples as such in the country, while the indigenous peoples and Maroons make up about 15 per cent of the population.

4. We can go on quoting violations of the rights of indigenous peoples throughout the world. Can we, then, not speak of violations of human rights? Is it surprising that we, the indigenous and tribal peoples of the world, want to establish a United Nations declaration on indigenous peoples, to have an internationally recognized form of protection? Is it strange that we want a permanent forum within the United Nations, to have a way of directly influencing Governments? Are we not right to demand legal rights on our traditional lands, and want the right of self-determination, to protect us from these forces? Many Governments are now taking the role of the former colonizators, in chasing the tribal peoples out of their traditional areas and claiming natural resources for the benefit of a few. And we all know the results: marginalization of our peoples, social injustice and political instability with its resulting adverse effects on national development.

5. The United Nations, therefore, stands before the same challenge as 50 years ago: to keep the peace and harmony among the peoples and nations of the world. The indigenous peoples of the world are willing to cooperate on the basis of mutual respect and understanding. We are organizing ourselves, for example in the International Alliance of Indigenous-Tribal Peoples of the Tropical Forests of Asia, Africa and the Americas. On the one hand indigenous peoples will not sit still and watch their own destruction passively; they will now speak out to the world and make public the violations of their rights. On the other hand, the indigenous peoples do not want to fight if it is not necessary; they are so eager to work together with Governments and organizations towards a truly just society, where indigenous and tribal peoples can live in harmony with others, adding to the cultural diversity of the world, and in which everyone has the joy of equal rights.

6. We once more want to urge the Commission not to delay unnecessarily the discussions on the draft United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. We urge the Commission to put as much effort as possible

in establishing very soon a permanent forum in the United Nations for indigenous peoples. We urge the Commission to implement very soon the mechanisms of funding activities from the Fund for the International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples. We call upon the delegates, from whom we have heard many positive sounds during the debate on item 23, not to limit their contribution to this item of the agenda to statements and intentions, but also to submit the relevant resolutions to establish the above-mentioned bodies and make the appropriate decisions.

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